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AUTHOR Smitter, Roger
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ABSTRACT

The typical textbook for the basic course fails to integrate the broad range of topics it introduces to the new student of communication. One way of addressing this problem would be to use feature films in the course, such as "Wall Street," "True Colors," "Other People's Money," "Milagro Beanfield War," and "Lean on Me." A summary of these films shows how well they demonstrate communication in a variety of contexts: interpersonal, groups, public speaking, typically within a larger organization, and stretching a bit, within a culture. Each contains a public speech given by one of the major characters. The integration of communication themes begins to occur for students when they see the character's speech as influenced by the same principles that influence his or her communication in other contexts. Most importantly, each film reveals an overarching theme about the role of communication in human interaction. The films give tangible representation to abstract and often difficult-to-understand themes. One or more of these films could be shown early in an academic term, immediately after the introductory chapters have been covered. For instance, "Wall Street," develops several themes relevant to the student of communication: the impact of symbolic forms on human behavior, the role of the spoken word and modern technology play in the creation of (not just communication of) information in society, and the nature of illusion and perception. The film clearly shows that information has become the commodity people seek, not tangible goods. (Contains 15 references.) (TB)

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USING FEATURE FILMS TO INTEGRATE THEMES AND CONCEPTS in the BASIC COURSE

Roger Smitter, PhD
Professor, Speech Communication & Theatre Department
Chair, Arts and Letters Division
North Central College
30 N. Brainard Street, Box 3063
Naperville, IL 60566
708-420-3467
rds@nccseq.noctrl.edu

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Introduction

The use of feature films to illustrate text and lecture material has been documented as a useful pedagogical tool for the speech communication course (see Proctor, 1984; Proctor & Adler, 1991). Films can breath life into abstract concepts as well as show the complex dynamics of the communication process. The ready availability of films in video tape form has greatly widened the use of feature films as teaching tools. This paper attempts to extend the discussion of feature films as pedagogical tools in two ways. It gives an overview of how four specific films can be used to illustrate speech communication principles in the basic

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course. More importantly, the paper hopes to show how films can provide an integrating force in the basic course. The need for integration is especially important in the hybrid basic course, which remains a popular offering on college campuses (Gibson, et al. 1985; Pearson, 1991; Trank, 1985). The paper will first lay out an argument for the need for integration. Then, it will describe four popular recent films. Finally, it will provide teaching notes for using the films in an integrative fashion.

The Need for Integration

The typical textbook designed for a hybrid course focuses the first few chapters on general topics (process, transaction; verbal and nonverbal language; self concept) and then proceeds to discuss communication contexts (interpersonal, small group and public communication; sometimes including organizational, mass and cross cultural communication). This array of topics alone creates a need for integration.

Unfortunately, the way this array is handled in most texts leads to fragmentation, not integration. Few texts fully establish connections between the principles stated in the early chapters and the subsequent contextual applications. For example, the notion of process, which is at the core of understanding communication, typically receives little explicit mention beyond the first chapter. Yet, the idea of process plays out differently depending on the context of the

communication.

Further adding to the problem is the form in which the material is presented. Chapters divide up material in sometimes arbitrary fashion. Within each chapter, students increasingly find extensive lists of concepts and terms. These are frequently drawn from a variety of sources, representing different perspectives on the communication process. Students often respond by memorizing the list and then repeating it back on a test or applying all the items on the list in a paper. Even if they resent having to memorize the list, they find it provides some structure in an otherwise puzzling array of topics, relieving them of making choices and generating their own thesis about a communication problem. Knowledge becomes decontextualized. However, the goal of instruction is to help students move beyond a simplistic application of the lists in analyzing the communication they observe.

It should be noted that the goal of the paper is <u>not</u> to criticize textbook writers and certainly not to indict any one textbook or group of books. Obviously, books need to be divided into chapters and each chapter needs a theme. Some of the best minds in our discipline have not found ways of fully integrating material across the many chapters of their books. The problem of the fragmentation is sufficiently broad that all instructors of the basic course need to find solutions.

The paper suggests one means for achieving integration in the basic course. The films described below provide useful <u>integrative case studies</u> which can be used over an entire term. Each shows characters communicating in a variety of

contexts: interpersonal, groups, public speaking, typically within a larger organization and, stretching it a bit, within a culture. Each contains a public speech given by one of the major characters. The integration begins to occur when students see the character's speech as influenced by the same principles which influence his or her communication in other contexts. Most importantly, each film reveals an overarching theme about the role of communication in human interaction. The film gives a tangible representation to these abstract and often difficult to understand themes. One (or more) of these films could be shown early in an academic term, immediately after the introductory chapters have been covered. The film can be used as a case study which illustrates the basic themes and then provides examples of how these general themes play out in a variety of communication contexts as these are studied across the rest of the term.

Summary of the Films

The four films selected for the paper deal with substantive issues and show characters in a variety of communication contexts. The characters, while not always fully developed, are interesting enough to hold the attention of students. The list is not intended to be exhaustive. The author has used all the films in class.

<u>Wall Street</u>

When it appeared in 1988, Wall Street quickly was seen as a morality play about the American economic system. The film generated an explosion of articles which analyzed greed as a societal trend. (for example, see Gross, 1988; Silk, 1988; Madrick 1988). It quickly became famous for the "greed is good" speech delivered by Wall Street corporate raider Gordon Gecco as he persuades stock holders to sell him a company. In the main plot, Gecco takes on young stock broker Bud Fox as a protege, introducing him to the fast paced action of corporate take overs and to Bud's romantic interest. As counter points to Gecco's greed, the film uses Bud's father (a blue collar, union worker) and an "old pro" broker at Bud's firm as spokespersons for the values of family and community.

Gecco is seen surrounded by high tech equipment which brings him the latest news of financial markets. He seduces Bud into an insider trading with talk of wealth and power. After initial successes, Bud develops a plan to save his father's company, only to find himself double-crossed by Gecco. Eventually, Bud's illegal activities are discovered and he implicates Gecco in the process.

True Colors

Peter and Tim become friends in their first year of law school. Tim is rich and well connected, engaged to Diana, the daughter of a US Senator. Peter claims his background is similar. But, Tim and Diana discover his working class roots. Tim and Peter become summer interns in Washington. Working for Diana's father, Peter is quickly taken up in the political power plays.

Peter decides to continue working in Washington; Tim returns to law school. Diane decides that Tim's ambition to be a Justice Department lawyer not good enough for her and breaks off the relationship. She eventually marries Peter.

Using her father's connections to build his campaign for a Congressional seat, Tim accepts campaign money from a mobster. When Peter uses his connection to Tim to gain the mobster a favor, the unwitting Tim is reprimanded at work. When Tim learns of Peter's duplicity, he volunteers to work undercover in Peter's campaign to secure evidence against the mobster (and Peter). Talking with his boss about his fitness for the assignment, Tim says of Peter, "He trusts me. You have someone's trust, you have all you need to nail him." Against the backdrop of a failing marriage Peter wins the election, only to have Tim tell him on election night about his role in the soon to be delivered indictments. Peter proceeds to give a highly successful "victory" speech to his followers, telling them that soon lies will be spread about him. At the end of the film, the two men have an uneasy but certainly not terminated friendship.

<u>Other People's Money</u>

Larry Garfield is a corporate raider who has extensive wealth but no personal relationships. The movie's early scenes show Garfield rolling out of bed and talking affectionately to his computer about the vulnerability of his latest takeover target: New England Wire and Steels (NEWS). Juxtaposed with this are scenes of NEWS employees posing with their CEO (Jorgeson) for the annual company

picture at Thanksgiving. "Jorgy's" family founded the company. When Garfield visits Jorgy to inform him of an offer, Jorgy is incredulous and refuses to deal with him. Jorgy's wife suggests they bring in Kate, her daughter, an aggressive New York attorney, to deal with the challenge. Kate's bold and assertive style attracts Garfield, setting up an ongoing pattern of conflict and mutual seduction. The legal struggles produce a showdown between Garfield and Jorgy at a NEWS stockholder meeting. Each has presented a slate of candidates for the board. Each gives a speech supporting his position: maintaining the company as a resource for the town and as a place of employment or selling off the company to gain profits for the stockholders.

Milagro Beanfield War

A small and poor Hispanic community, Milagro, in rural New Mexico is slowly being swallowed by a land developer. After being frustrated at not finding work with the developer's firm, Joe, a prominent Milagro resident, kicks at an irrigation gate which controls a stream owned by the developers. To his surprise, the gate opens and water flows into his field where once his father grew beans. He lets the water continua to run and proceeds to plant beans.

News of Joe's action quickly spreads through the community. A local businesswoman, Ruby, quickly sees the symbolic value of Joe's action for rallying residents to oppose the land development. Ruby enlists the reluctant support of Charlie Bloom, former prominent defense lawyer for social protestors who now

edits the community's newspaper. She organizes a town meeting where she speaks in favor of a protest. She then tricks Bloom into speaking in support of the protest. At the same time, the developers are plotting with state politicians to stop what they have come to believe is a major protest. The local Hispanic sheriff, whose initial loyalties are unclear, plus the inept actions of the developers and politicians, create the means for a nonviolent solution to the rising tensions.

Lean on Me

Based on a true story, the film centers on Joe Clark as a tough-minded, authoritarian educator selected to reform an inner-city high school in Patterson, New Jersey. Shown as a rebel even in his early days, Clark is selected as a last hope to raise the student's scores on a state proficiency test.

In his first speech to the faculty, he clearly demands their obedience. Before his his first speech to the students, he rounds up the alledged student drug dealers and other students with a history of disruption. He then publically tosses these students out of school in front of an all school assembly.

Clark's reform methods are highly autocratic, including the firing of teachers who do not accept his authority and chaining the doors shut to keep the drug dealers out. He demands students follow his dictates in order to develop pride in themselves. He makes knowing the school song a measure of this pride. He initiates a rigorous program of studying for the state proficiency test.

Along the way, he defends his actions in speeches to the school board and to teachers. That speech, along with other actions, incur the rath of parents who make a pact with the mayor to have Clark dismissed.

Clark is direct but caring with the students. It is the students who hear the major speech of the film, just before they take the state test. He exhorts them in revival like fashion to prove the rest of the world wrong by doing well on the test.

Clark has few friends. Both the superintendenet and an assistant principle, a female, eventually erupt in response to his single-minded approach. Their styles of controntation are distinctive but equally effective in modifying his demeanor slightly. The movie ends with Clark's methods being vindicated, at least for the short term goal of achieving student success on the proficiency test.

Integrative Applications of the Films

Wall Street -- Power of Symbolic Forms

Several overarching themes emerge in this film: the impact of symbolic forms on human behavior, the role of the spoken word and modern technology play in the creation of (not just communication of) information in society and the nature of illusion and perception. A few illustrations will be helpful to give

substance to these broad themes.

When Gecco shows Bud his art collection, he brags that his investment has appreciated in value. He says that he deals in "illusions," whether it be art or the perception that a company's stock is valuable. It's a powerful message about how symbols take on value apart from their intrinsic worth.

A similar theme in the film focuses on the power of the spoken word. Bud tells Gecco secret information that the value of the stock in his father's company is about to increase significantly. The context and intent of this message makes the exchange a case of illegal insider trading. Similar messages exchanged between Bud and his father are not illegal. In another scene, Gecco reaches an oral agreement about a multimillion dollar deal with his competitor. Even in a context of an intense rivalry between the men, the spoken word will be honored. At the end of the film, Bud elicits from Gecco the words which will be used to indict him in the courts.

Finally, the film clearly shows that information has become the commodity people seek, not tangible goods. Gecco makes his living by knowing information. Bud ingratiates himself to Gecco by offering him illegal information. Gecco seals the seduction by putting Bud to work finding insider trader information. Students can begin to appreciate in full a lesson which is fundamental to understanding the communication process: symbols cause people to do things.

The film also illustrates what happens when the users of the information lose contact with the tangible world which the symbols represent. For Bud, this

insight is made powerfully clear when he realizes that Gecco seeks his father's airline only to sell it off, ignoring the people who will be unemployed as a result. Likewise, Gecco first appears on screen surrounded by high tech computer systems which provide instant access to financial information but little else about the companies he buys.

The film holds potential for teaching a number of other concepts commonly presented in the basic course. Like Gecco, Bud becomes a person who defines himself in terms of money and power. Bud's romantic interest initially shares this self definition. She comes to see Bud and herself in a very different light.

The film could be used to teach about the interpersonal perception process. Gecco quickly sizes up Bud as a young man ready to be seduced by power and money. The seduction also illustrates the process nature of communication. Once Bud has agreed to do Gecco's work, it is increasingly difficult to resist the next request.

Gecco's "greed is good" speech offers many avenues for analysis. Gecco is persuasive, making a case for applying a survivalist mentality to economic transactions. He effectively shifts the audience's mind away from the best interests of the company to their own best interests as shareholders. He masterfully juxtaposes arguments about management salaries with the issue of responsibility. The speech shows the power of presenting a general thesis (greed is good) and then drawing conclusions from that thesis.

The film also has value for teaching about the functions of interpersonal

relationships. For example, Bud has three possible mentors in the film: Gecco, his father and Lou, the "old pro" stockbroker at his firm. Each gives him advice about fundamental issues of conduct. Despite the good advice of two potential mentors, Bud chooses the wrong one.

The film also shows characters working in groups. Gecco and Bud's father compete for leadership in one such setting. Gecco is shown as an authoritarian leader in most settings. Bud has titular leadership power in one setting but lacks the ability to execute that power.

As is the case with the other films, this one raises the question of whether ethics are defined by ends or means. Gecco's speech is the most obvious point for teaching about ethics.

Other People's Money -- Conflicting Conceptualizations of Organizations

On the surface Other People's Money has many similarities to Wall Street. In both, a character presents a speech premised on an economic survivalist value. Yet, their pedagogical applications are different.

The overarching theme of OPM is the starkly different ways Jorgy and Garfield use language to define an organization. These opposing conceptions are given fundamentally different symbolic representation (primarily in the form of metaphors and images) in the speeches each man presents to the NEWS

shareholders. For example, Jorgeson invokes images of community and family to describe his company. He also reminds his listeners of the long history of the organization as a piece of their town and families. In his conception, an organization's goals transcend making money.

In stark contrast, Garfield makes a reasonable argument that economic interests are exactly why investors are interested in NEWS. He invokes religious images to describe the funeral which needs to be held in order for NEWS to be put to rest and for stockholders to move on to new investments. He effectively uses facts and figures to show that others, not he, are responsible for "killing" the company by withholding tax breaks or demanding higher wages.

The contrasting conceptions of organizations can be linked to other concepts. In many ways, Jorgy and Garfield are more similar than dissimilar. Both are stubborn and unwilling to listen to reasonable arguments for compromise; neither sees his own position as unreasonable. What distinguishes them as persons (and the language of their speeches) is the set of underlying values each holds to.

These differences in values allow the basic course instructor to teach conflict resolution. The film clearly shows that not all conflict is solvable using communication and negotiation. It also shows that once these two personalities collide in an early scene, the final showdown of the two speeches is inevitable. In the conflict, Kate represents a negotiator willing to use any and all devices to get her way. She orchestrates a more or less happy resolution at the end of the

film. Her negotiation tactics provide a context for contrasting utilitarian and absolutist ethics in communication.

Beyond these broad themes, the film also provides for discussions of many topics found in the basic course, such as the link between self concept and communication processes. Viewers get a glimpse of Garfield as the overachiever who was shunned by others as a child. Yet, his insecurities vanish when he is before an audience. It contains brief but powerful scenes of both Jorgy and Garfield meeting with "their people" in small groups. Each exercises an autocratic leadership style, although the oral expression of that style takes different forms. The film keeps the viewer guessing as to Kate's attraction to Garfield as they frequently engage in risque bantering.

True Colors -- Currencies of Friendship

Like Wall Street, this film reveals the value of information in society. Peter understands that political, not economic, information is the currency of Washington. In this context, the film also illustrates that understanding the communication process is essential in the construction of the self concept.

The film nicely illustrates how social exchange theory can be used to analyze friendship. Each of the three friends makes use of a different commodity in the exchange process. Peter deals in favors and information in Washington, a currency

which Tim cannot understand at times. For example, while Peter is constructing a scenario which will enable him to blackmail a rival Senator, Tim continually asks, "What are you doing?" Likewise, Tim cannot understand why his fiance is breaking off the engagement because he has no ambition beyond being a "cop" at the Justice Department.

Like all humans, Peter needs the responses of others to validate his self concept. Yet, his ability to engage in deception, from the very first encounter with Tim, leads him to construct a self which differs fundamentally from that held by Tim or Diana. For example, after they discover his working class roots, Tim justifies his deception by claiming they would not have liked him if they had known his background. When he presents his "victory" speech to his followers, it is clear Tim has created a public self which is validated by the audience's enthusiastic response while his private self continues to be underfed. Before he speaks, he tells Peter "They believe in me. You can't take that away from me." In fact, this scene provides the best insight into how a character's self concept influences his speech presentation.

The film also presents a realistic picture of two males testing the limits of friendship, retaining some degree of a relationship through deceptions and betrayals as well as good times. Nicely mixed in is the shifting romantic interests of Diana, who moves from one male to the other and then returns to the first for advice and support. Added to this complexity are the many differences of class membership, wealth and values which separate Peter from Tim and Diana.

Peter's speech at the end of the film provides many options for teaching. Peter uses inoculation theory with his audience, telling his supporters that his enemies will say untrue things about him. His inoculation strategies are based on a presumed identification of the audience with him: "I did what you would have done," he says, in order to better society. His use of these strategies makes sense given the narrative which proceeds the speech.

Milagro Bean Field War -- The Power of Symbolic Acts

The most obvious application of this film would seem to be for teaching cross cultural communication. Unfortunately, the stereotypical conflict and the caricatures of the Anglos in the film severely limit its application in this area. Nevertheless, the basic course instructor can use Milagro to integrate three themes: the power of symbolic acts, the role of informal channels of communication, and the symbolic nature of leadership.

Joe's act of opening an irrigation gate takes on symbolic value very quickly in the tightly knit community. While many people come to see the "stolen" water, only Ruby fully appreciates its symbolic value for shaping a protest. Initially mystified at the response to his act, Joe also comes to see its importance. When criticized by his wife for acting rashly without talking to others, he responds, "If I had talked about it before I did it, I'd still be talking." As a result of his act, the

community grapevine and Ruby's attempts to structure meaning, Joe finds himself a reluctant leader within his community.

Ruby's organizational efforts culminate in a community meeting where she hopes to initiate an organized protest against the developers. In this scene, students have two brief but powerful speeches to analyze. First, Ruby invokes the history of the community, reminding her audience that their poverty has never been something to be ashamed of. She warns them that the development project will be the end of the community. Bloom's speech makes less use of pathos: He explains that the developer's promise of "prosperity" will generate higher taxes which, in turn, will force the locals to sell their land. What ensues shows the ambiguous impact a symbolic act can have. The audience members debate the value of forming a protest group. Several (including Joe) are nominated as leaders but refuse to take leadership. Old community hostilities boil up and a fight breaks out, allowing the already poised local authorities to rush in and arrest Bloom as a trouble maker. When Ruby finally bails Bloom out of jail, she is elated with the results of the meeting, he is far less happy. A useful discussion can be built around questions of the effectiveness of the speeches and the ethics of Ruby's tactics with Bloom and the audience.

The film contains excellent material for teaching conflict resolution through communication. Bernie, the Hispanic sheriff, ambles through the film, seemingly trying to find a middle ground between his own people and the Anglo powers. He emerges at the end not only as a leader but also as a skilled win/win strategist in

potentially violent conflicts.

Lean on Me -- The Exertion of Power and Authority

The film raises an important question: How far can a leader go in using authoritarian methods to achieve a socially desirable goal? Related questions entail the role of communication: Does communication ability create a demagogue? What are the limits of power in public and interpersonal communication? When are cultural specific forms used to persuade? When to coerce?

The film, as well as the real-life Clark, have received considerable criticism for suggesting that dictitorial methods are needed to reform education (Hyman, 1989). Clark's methods, which included chaining doors to keep drug dealers out and carrying a baseball bat and bull horn, are hardly characteristic of communication as dialogue. In his first speech to the faculty, he publically humiliates a teacher/coach with a demotion. Later, he interrupts classes, fires a teacher in public, and makes inordinate demands on his assistants.

In his speech to the school board and parents, many of whom are on welfare, he makes derogatory statements about the abusers of welfare. He turns the criticism away from himself by speaking in a traditional call-response mode of African-American churches, silencing his opponents.

In his speech to the students just before the state test, he clearly appeals to

a sense of racism and classism. He creates an "us-them" mentality, telling the students to prove the white, middle class world was wrong to abandon them to an inner city school.

Clark justifies his actions by saying that the school is engaged in a war for the survival of students. His arguments thinly veil a conceptualization of the world that is almost literally black and white. He will tolerate no disagreement from students or faculty. He hardly talks about anything except improving test scores. Students can discuss the validity of Clark's justification as well as the means he uses to implement it.

Clark shows a different side in dealing with students one-on-one. While still demanding, he is more nuturing and supportive. He communicates in a way that shows the value of believing in self. He seems to be a continuation of the Hollywood staple of the tough-guy who is kind under the surface. However, his less confrontive side is always shown with students, people who are almost powerless compared to him. Students can discuss whether such a stereotype is grounded in reality. They can also be helped to see how power dominates Clark's (and probably everyone's) dealings with people.

Clark seems to be able to communicate in two spheres. He is able to play the role of the Black preacher, offering inspiration and an authoritarian command of the flock. He is also able to confront the members of the white world directly on their own terms. Students can discuss whether this ability is to be praised or criticized in a single-minded zealot such as Clark.

Two peers are able to break through his veneer, if temporarily. Clark and the school superindentent, an old friend, nearly come to blows over a question of policy. Finally, Clark backs down in the face of a combination of power and friendship. A female assistant principle gets Clark to admit, hwoever obliquely, that he was wrong. She uses tears and anger to make her message known. Students can discuss whether such stereotypical methods are necessary to break through to a fanatic such as Clark.

Conclusions

The four films identified here did not win universal praise when they were released. Writing in New Republic, Kaufman (1988) said Wall Street was full of cliches, focusing on the system and not the more interesting personalities. Canby (1988) writing in the New York Times, said Milagro avoids the cliches of the "cattlemen against the railroad genre" and in doing so avoids telling any story. Canby (1991), again in the New York Times, said True Colors tries to be a morality play while preaching questionable values about the inability of humans to rise above their upbringing. Janet Maslin (1991) in the Times said that Other People's Money is "too genial to be hard hitting." Lean on Me received the most fire when it was produced. Time criticized it for sacrificing a discussion of complex issues in order to provide "fast-food inspirationalism." (1989). Writing in

Education Digest, Hyman called Clark's character a racist (1989).

Despite the reviews, the films provide useful teaching tools for integrating material in the basic course. The films are not to be taught as films but rather as case studies of humans engaged in an ongoing process of communication: the power of symbolic acts, the function of communication in community, the various currencies of exchange in human relations. Just as students may find additional flaws in the movies, they will also find additional integrating themes in the study of communication. The introduction noted that basic courses need to integrate material. This is especially significant in the hybrid basic course. This analysis suggests the films could be used in other types of basic courses as well. The films nicely illustrate general themes for introductory theory courses. For the public speaking course, the films also provide excellent examples of public speeches placed in a particular context.

Proctor and Adler (1991) suggested that feature films can be easily incorporated into the teaching of a communication course. They saw films as an extension of teaching, providing an additional tool to teachers, who would need to do little in the way of course revision. However, the analysis presented in this paper suggests that instructors may need to revamp their teaching significantly so as to help students achieve a better sense of integration in their studies. This effort can only serve to improve the basic course and perhaps the discipline as a whole.

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